

THE healing GROUND

by MICHAEL SHARP

The tenants living above Bill Freeman's garage in the high desert town of Ramona, Calif., looked out their back window one June evening just in time to catch a curious sight.

A small bobcat kitten had climbed over a chain-link fence, walked out from the orange and tangerine trees, crossed a putting-green-perfect strip of lawn, and crept over to the swimming pool—where she was now taking a long drink.

Beyond the backyard is a sizeable ravine, and the Freemans are no strangers to seeing bobcats and coyotes in their neighborhood. But this was a first. Or rather, two firsts: Not once in 10 years had they seen a bobcat within the fences of their backyard, and never had they seen a wild animal drinking from their pool.

For the rest of the weekend, the Freemans kept their Labrador retriever away from the yard. Returning from church on Sunday, they saw the kitten. And by Monday, there were two of them out there, sharing a drink. Worried that they were moving slowly, that their fur appeared unkempt, that there was no sign of a mother, Bill Freeman snapped pictures and emailed them to Ali Crumpacker, director of The Fund for Animals Wildlife Center nearby—one of five care centers across the country operated in partnership with The HSUS.

"I knew they were a good resource of what to do," he would say later.

More than 380 injured and orphaned animals came through the Wildlife Center last year, and staff learn that a day can quickly change course with a box of baby crows arriving at the front gate or a phone call reporting that a skunk's been hit by a car.

On this day, it's the email from Freeman.

"You can see the patches of loose dead fur sticking up, so they have not been groomed,"

says Crumpacker, reviewing the pictures on her computer screen. "And they're squinting in both pictures, which to me is going to indicate that they're covered in fleas and they have ticks on their eyelids, which again mom would have ripped off. So either mom's really, really unattentive, or she's gone. And they're obviously way too young to be on their own."



This bobcat kitten and her brother were found drinking out of a backyard swimming pool in Ramona, Calif. Staff at The Fund for Animals Wildlife Center then set to work trying to save them from dehydration, parasites, and mange.





The biggest challenge is making sure they don't like us. We can't be friends. We have to love it when they hate us.

— ALI CRUMPACKER, DIRECTOR OF THE FUND FOR ANIMALS WILDLIFE CENTER

Soon, three staff members pile into a pickup truck, bound for the Freeman house. The plan is to set live traps for the kittens and then wait to hear back from the family. But as they walk around back, one of the bobcats is crossing the grass. She pays little mind to the newcomers, continuing her quest to the edge of the pool and another long drink.

The rest happens quickly. With her two colleagues blocking possible escape routes, animal care specialist Kim D'Amico—or “KimBa” as she's known around the center—moves quietly toward the bobcat, a large net in her hand. “I knew I only had one shot,” she'll say later. And she nails it, dropping the net down, keeping the little bobcat out of the pool. The kitten jumps straight into the air. Caught.

The bobcat is moved to a carrier and driven back to the center. Staff members are just preparing to sedate and examine her when the call comes over the radio: The second bobcat kitten is in a trap.

A Refuge for Predator Species

Located some 35 miles northeast of San Diego, the Wildlife Center was once the site of a dog breeding kennel during the 1920s. Brick kennels and wire doors are still visible inside the one-story building now used to prepare food, as are the outdoor concrete dog runs, converted into a washing station for bowls, cages, and carriers.

The site eventually became a boarding kennel, then a traditional dog-and-cat shelter, before playing a pivotal role in the rescue of hundreds of goats off California's San Clemente Island in the 1980s. Subjected to a culling program by the U.S. Navy, the goats became another project of legendary animal advocate Cleveland Amory, who several years earlier had worked to save similarly fated burros from the Grand Canyon, opening The Fund for Animals Black Beauty Ranch in east Texas to house them and myriad other species.

Animal care specialist Kim D'Amico swoops a net down on the ailing female bobcat kitten in Bill Freeman's backyard, then moves her into a carrier with assistance from colleague Christine Barton. Once back at the Wildlife Center, D'Amico and vet tech Gina Taylor conduct a preliminary medical exam.

“The lady who operated the shelter here in Ramona got in contact with Amory somehow and said that she had all of this pasture land around her dog shelter, and she'd be more than happy to accommodate some of the goats,” Crumpacker says. “So, three years and 600 goats later, she donated the property, with the agreement that the remaining dogs and cats would finish being adopted out.”

Today, the 13-acre facility is home to 22 permanent residents—16 bobcats, three mountain lions, one coyote, one African lion, and a pygmy hippo named Hannah—plus 39 cats rescued off San Nicolas Island and a revolving door of native wild animals in need. The shrill calls of two peacocks patrolling the parking lot provide a daily soundtrack, as does the regular hum of airplanes taking off and landing at nearby Ramona airport. Desert mountains rise in the distance, in every direction but the west, and the afternoon sun is constant, unflinching.

In wildlife rehabilitation circles, the Wildlife Center is best known for its work with predator species—coyotes, bobcats, skunks, birds of prey—whose rehabilitations can require a lengthy commitment, sometimes up to nine months in the case of bobcat kittens. Staff must act as surrogate mothers—from a distance—helping ensure the animals learn to scout for meals, find shelter, and live among their own species while also ensuring they don't associate humans with food or friendship.

“The biggest challenge is making sure they don't like us,” says Crumpacker, a New Jersey native who was studying rhinoceros tracks for the Endangered Wildlife Trust in South Africa when she

was hired as director in September 2010. “We can’t be friends. We have to love it when they hate us.”

That certainly appears to be the case with the little bobcats brought in from Bill Freeman’s backyard. And to an outsider, any notion that these are cuddly kittens is quickly dispelled with the first growl—a distinctly wild voice of displeasure.

A new medical center will open in mid-2013, tripling the capacity to take in wild animals in need. But for now, animals are treated in what was the former shelter owner’s home. Dog crates—holding recovering hawks, coyote pups, and skunks—line tabletops in one room and fill a smaller back room. The examination table stands in what had been the kitchen.

This is the first stop for the bobcats, who are battling mange, parasites, anemia, and hunger.

Staff work quickly, purposefully; they have a window of 15 to 30 minutes before the sedation wears off. The bobcats are weighed and their temperatures taken. D’Amico clips tick after tick out of their ears, while veterinary technician Gina Taylor implants microchips, injects fluids and a standard house-cat vaccination, draws blood for an external study on mange, and applies a topical flea and tick treatment. They note that the male kitten, while feistier than his sister, is also colder to the touch, the mange leaving his forehead hair thin and crusty.

Once done, they gently place one kitten, and later the second, on a heating pad, draping towels around their crate. The female kitten’s body temperature sits at 96.4 degrees, her brother’s at 92.2. Typically, it should be about 100.

“There’s not a guarantee that this guy is going to make it,” Taylor cautions as she works on the male, wrapped in a towel and occasionally letting loose a groggy cry. “Most critical: We’ll see how he does tonight. If he survives tonight, and then if he survives another night, then I’ll feel much better.”

The Lives They Left Behind

For animals like these, the needs are urgent, the main goals recovery and release back to the wild. But for those raised in captivity and unable to live on their own again, staff must provide long-term care tailored to the needs of each species—for years, sometimes decades.

In the case of one round-faced resident, that has included making sure she has bodies of water for her swimming pleasure—and by the looks of her antics this June evening, she approves. After spending much of the day simply floating in her pond, the 38-year-old pygmy hippo bursts into a rare flurry of action. Here comes



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39 cats also call
the sanctuary home

Hannah, racing along her fence line, head swinging, mouth open wide—a blur of pink tongue and huge white teeth.

Suddenly, she goes racing back down a short hill, into a clump of trees, and then crashing out into her pond, where she promptly pushes her blue barrel to the other side. She rests her chin on the barrel. She climbs on top of it with her front legs. She pauses. She pushes it back across the pond, bumping it into a tree.

Life wasn’t always so easy for Hannah. Records indicate she was born at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C.; she later ended up in a California backyard without adequate care or habitat. When rescued, she was in poor shape, her skin dry and cracked.

The center’s staff began nursing her back to health, later building a swimming pool. It is this type of specialized care—like balance platforms for the mountain lions and automatic solar-powered misting systems to keep the bobcats cool—that has helped create a desert oasis for 22 animals who never had the chance to return to the wild. Animals like Hannah, doing barrel rolls in her pool, and Samson the African lion, idly watching the planes fly by, and Sheba the mountain lion, rubbing affably against her fencing like a 110-pound house cat.

Because of their prior histories of mistreatment and improper care, the needs of many of these victims of the trade in exotic animals often go beyond typical species requirements. Across the dirt road from Hannah’s enclosure, staff typically begin their morning rounds with Samson.

“He’s spoiled and he gets kind of jealous sometimes,” explains wildlife caretaker Mirjam Schippers. But there are medical reasons for indulging him as well: Samson, who was confiscated from a



Hannah
PYGMY HIPPO

trainer in Los Angeles at 3 months old, has a form of dwarfism—the result of inbreeding common in the exotic pet trade. As Crumpacker puts it, he’s “the right-sized lion on the front and the wrong-sized lion on the back,” an affliction that can wreak havoc on his internal organs. Samson takes as many as 12 pills a day, if he decides to eat, so feeding him first spreads out the medicine further between morning and afternoon meals.

On this morning, Samson yawns at the breakfast Schippers presents him at the end of a stick. She inspects a little blood on his nose as a summer intern cleans the other two sections of his enclosure. They refill his six big blue water bowls.

Samson can be excused for not getting particularly excited: After all, Grammy-nominated singer Leona Lewis serenaded him on his 11th birthday in February, so it’s understandably downhill from there. Still, on occasion, he likes to stick his head into his big yellow barrel and roar his way to an echo. And he loves—loves!—to roll around on a donated Christmas tree until there’s nothing left but the trunk. Notes Schippers: “I think we finally removed it in April.”

From Samson’s area, it’s on to feed the mountain lions, whose three enclosures mark the back right corner of the facility. There’s the talkative Tonka, a victim of the exotic pet trade and a notorious scaredy cat. There’s the wild-born Sasha, whom the Department of Fish and Game took in as an orphan and used for practicing net captures and darting. And then there’s the purr machine known as Sheba.



AFRICAN LION Samson

During a routine traffic stop, an officer found Sheba in the back of a car—declawed, supposedly being trained to ride a horse. Her pink harness had dyed her fur, and a poor diet and improper sheltering had left her with bowed legs and poor balance. “She wouldn’t have made much of a horse rider,” notes senior wildlife caretaker Christine Barton, “because when she came here, she couldn’t walk up ramps. She couldn’t jump right. But she was young and quickly recov-

Clockwise from top left: Wildlife caretaker Kim Spall prepares to feed Samson through the fence of his enclosure; vet tech Gina Taylor examines a red-tailed hawk; Stacey Parker spends time with Nick, one of the San Nicolas Island cats; Mirjam Schippers works with Hannah, the 38-year-old pygmy hippo; Christine Barton and intern Tore Smidth move coyote pups to the prerelease enclosure, where they will live until they are 6 months old and ready to be set free.



Chelsea & SAN NIC CATS Faye

ered with proper nutrition and then the right type of enclosure.”

The biggest sanctuary enclosure belongs to Chewbacca, the 7-year-old coyote—or “Chewy,” as he’s affectionately known. Chewy spends his days chasing lizards, playing with stuffed animals, napping under his pine tree, and sneaking up on staff members working near his fence. “I spill coffee on myself at least once a month because I forget,” jokes Crumpacker. Later, when a stranger gets too close to his enclosure, he lunges forward, driving his front paws into the ground, kicking up dirt like an angry baseball coach arguing with an umpire.

The buzzword around Ramona is “imprinted,” and that’s precisely the fate that found Chewy and many of the sanctuary bobcats. Thinking he was an orphaned puppy, a concerned citizen took him home and began bottle-feeding him on the couch. By the time his true identity was realized, the damage had been done—he didn’t take when introduced to other coyote pups, and he was too comfortable with humans to return to the wild.

Now, as staff continue to emphasize community outreach and education, they hope that people will turn to the center before attempting to intervene with a young animal—much like Bill Freeman did in emailing those pictures.

Nature vs. Nurture

Sheltering a wild animal for years at a time requires a bit of a balance: Caretakers must provide enough distance for their charges to retain their wild natures but build enough trust to ensure proper veterinary care and other assistance. In an area where wildfires loom as a constant threat and animals may need to be evacuated, a small lockout area in each enclosure is a necessity. Staff teach sanctuary animals to walk into those areas, then into a crate—training that also helps with medical evaluations and rotation to different cages for enrichment. “Each animal is prepped,” Crumpacker says. “I know that Tonka cooperates within eight minutes. I know that Sheba cooperates within two minutes. I know that Ramon [a bobcat] takes three hours.”

Building structures must also accommodate the needs of short-term guests. Unlike the center’s aging permanent denizens, animals in rehab will one day be released and need to be prepared for reentry into the wild. On this June afternoon, eight coyote pups are graduating from a small wooden conditioning shelter to a larger prerelease enclosure, where they will remain until they are 6 months old. Following right behind them, three bobcat kittens are headed out of the medical center and into the shelter, where like the coyotes, they will spend two to three weeks adapting to the weather before moving to their own outdoor enclosure.

In between moving the coyotes—a coordinated effort to net frantic pups in a tight space—and releasing the kittens, staff must make subtle changes to the shelter. Coyotes are ground dwellers and bobcats are climbers, so out come the little dens and in come logs,



39 Lives The San Nic cats take it easy

There aren’t many pens at The Fund for Animals Wildlife Center in which caretaker Stacey Parker could pull this off—kneeling by a food bowl, petting a couple of the four-legged inhabitants.

But the large outdoor enclosure near the front of the property represents a totally different project for the center: It’s home to 39 formerly feral cats, rescued in 2009 from a planned extermination on California’s San Nicolas Island. In the three years since, staff members have worked to gain their trust, with the hopes of readying some for adoption.

“Three months ago, I could not touch Milo like this at all,” says Parker, who is typically greeted by some two dozen cats when she walks in with their afternoon meal—a moment she’ll usually take to put her bucket down and interact with as many as possible.

The enclosure is divided into four sections, replete with bushes and trees, logs for climbing, plastic igloos for afternoon naps, and foraging bowls that encourage the cats to paw dry food out through holes. Today, all 39 cats are nestled into the last section as workers lay concrete under where their kitty litter is typically kept—a project to keep the area more sanitary and easier to clean.

The construction has left them a bit reserved, and most remain lying on a raised wooden platform, soaking in speckles of afternoon sun, one eye on their visitors. Sahara climbs a tree log. Red lies with his head on a rock.

There are a few who never disappoint, though, especially when volunteer Sara Presley Scott walks in with treats. Nick, the charmer of the bunch, is soon on his hind legs, reaching for a snack. “We provide every comfort we possibly can for them,” Presley Scott says. “... It’s very rewarding. A lot different than your standard day-to-day job; I consider it kind of therapy coming here.”

Living Symbols

Sanctuary animals personify captive wildlife issues

Sheba the ever-purring mountain lion was found in the back of a car during a routine traffic stop—declawed, apparently being trained to ride a horse. Samson the African lion once spent his days being prepped for TV and film productions.

Such beginnings don't come without a cost—either to the animals, both of whom in this case have battled health problems, or to the animal protection groups and sanctuaries that are left to pick up the pieces. In 2012 alone, for example, The Fund for Animals Wildlife Center, operated in partnership with The HSUS, will spend an estimated \$42,680 to care for Samson, plus \$21,136 more for Sheba.

They are two of 22 sanctuary animals on the property.

"When we accept a new animal, it's often for the next 25 years," says center director Ali Crumpacker. "There's only so many I can take. There's only so many sanctuaries that can take them at all. And there's way more candidates for placement than there are places to take them."

In that way, animals like Sheba and Samson are living symbols of The HSUS's broader work, reminders of why campaigners are fighting to end the mistreatment and private possession of wild animals. In Ohio, following The HSUS's push to ban the new ownership of wild animals, Gov. John Kasich signed the Dangerous Wild Animal Act into law in June. The organization has also used undercover investigations—like a recent look into G.W. Exotic Animal Memorial Park in Oklahoma—to expose the dark side of keeping exotic animals in captivity. One such investigation set in motion the HSUS Animal Rescue Team's removal of three tigers, two mountain lions, two leopards, two wolf hybrids, and a macaque monkey from a roadside zoo in Collins, Miss.

Like Samson and Sheba, they are the lucky ones, finding sanctuary at The Fund for Animals Cleveland Amory Black Beauty Ranch (an HSUS affiliate), Carolina Tiger Rescue, Wildlife Rescue & Rehabilitation, and the Born Free USA Primate Sanctuary. So many more, though—from tiger cubs used in shopping mall photo shoots to other baby animals in traveling zoos—aren't as fortunate.

"The breeders are not being charged with the responsibility of ensuring that the animals that they are producing have lifelong quality care," Crumpacker says. "They're products, and they're a commodity, and when they're no longer useful for that particular program, then they're sold or killed."

It's a problem, a cycle, that The HSUS will continue to combat.

leaned up against perches.

There are more guidelines to this process: Young are always raised in groups—pairs, at the very least—to help teach each other proper communication and behavior. Staff minimize any handling and exposure to humans and human voices. And the enclosures are designed to allow pups and kittens to test their motor skills—climbing trees, building dens, finding food. There are plans to build a stream in the bobcat enclosure, with the hope they'll someday look for natural drinking sources rather than backyard water bowls.

"We always get them when they're really down," wildlife caretaker Kim Spall says. "But then to see them go back out in the wild, when they're back to their normal situation, it's just really beautiful. That's an amazing sight."

Back in the medical center, caretakers hope for the same fate for the two bobcat kittens, barely strong enough to stand. The pair survived their first night, but there are still concerns. Fecal tests reveal intestinal parasites, and on the second day, the male kitten does not register a body temperature—meaning he's dropped somewhere below 92 degrees.

He's given more warm fluids. He's placed in an incubator with his

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— KIM SPALL, CARETAKER

Sheba MOUNTAIN LION





sister. “If I could will you to stay alive, I would,” Taylor tells him, “because I thought about you all of last night.”

The next morning, D’Amico is the first one into the medical center. She finds the two kittens snuggled together on a donated fur hat. The little male is no longer alive. But there is still hope for his sister, and in the days ahead, staff will give her a cube of frozen animal blood to lap up, with hopes of combating the anemia. They’ll look to “MacGyver” an oxygen hose into the incubator. They’ll give her injections for the mange and medication for the parasites and continue to feed her small meals. Eventually, she’ll be healthy enough to join other bobcat kittens outside in the conditioning shelter.

Sweet Release

Over three days in June, over 13 acres in Ramona, life juggles strides, setbacks, and surprises. The fight for survival, for a return to the wild, is constant. It’s everywhere—every animal in a different chapter, every animal facing his own journey home.

A little skunk recovering from a broken leg is out of the medical center, introduced to another pair in an outdoor pen. They feel each other out with a unique dance—grunting, lunging, retreating. Beyond the bamboo siding, coyote pups crash through palm fronds in their new enclosure. And in the medical center, the surviving bobcat kitten sleeps alone in her incubator, her temperature rising auspiciously back toward normal.

On the same morning she discovered the kitten’s dead brother, D’Amico will walk into the large flight enclosure, armed with a net fastened to a long pole. She’ll help flush the birds back and forth. She’ll help find the juvenile red-tailed hawk marked with the No. 96 leg band for identification.

A volunteer will then drive the hawk 13 miles west of here, near the shores of Lake Poway, where 19 days earlier a motorist had seen the bird sitting by the edge of the road. Whenever possible, staff like to return animals to the location they were found, and on this day, ranger Annie Ransom—the first to find him floundering in a bush, wings extended, shivering in the rain—has the honors.

“Oh, this is a different bird,” she says, admiring the results of his

Whenever possible, center staff like to release an animal where he was originally found. Three weeks after finding a red-tailed hawk struggling in a bush on the outskirts of this parking lot, ranger Annie Ransom is given the privilege of setting the bird free. “It’s a phenomenal experience,” she’ll say later, “just to see an animal return to the wild.”

recovery as he’s lifted out of a cardboard carrier. She walks down an empty parking lot, gloved left hand holding his legs, right hand resting gently on his back. She bends slightly, and with a slight boost, she lets him go.

The hawk takes off, banking to his right, landing halfway up a nearby tree. “I can’t describe that feeling,” Ransom says afterward. “... It’s a pitter-patter in the heart.”

Somewhere in the distance, a thick marine layer sits heavy on the western horizon. Residents here know it as the “May grey” and the “June gloom.” But from this parking lot, through these trees, the eye can see only blue skies—and as the hawk lifts off from his branch, the promise of brighter days. ■

COYOTE Chewy

